



NORTH DAKOTA
DEPARTMENT *of* HEALTH

GUEST OPINION ARTICLE

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This guest opinion is by State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D.

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North Dakota Prepared To Respond to Public Health Emergencies

Recently, a report was released scoring each state on its public health preparedness. Contrary to the report's implications, North Dakota's public health system is better prepared to respond to emergencies than the report reflects.

Each year, Trust for America's Health (TFAH) releases a report rating the efforts of states in planning for response to public health emergencies. In this year's report, North Dakota's score was 7 out of 10; however, TFAH has indicated the score will change to 8 out of 10 because of some updated information, which I will explain below. With the updated score, North Dakota is one of 16 states that scored 8 out of 10.

It's important to realize that the TFAH report is a snapshot in time, and much of the scoring depends upon when the information was reviewed and how that information was interpreted. Let me highlight three areas in the report that illustrate this point:

- When the report was developed, North Dakota's plan for dispensing federal medical supplies had not yet been assessed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. As a result, we did not receive credit for our plan. However, now that CDC's review is complete, TFAH has indicated that the final version of the report will give us credit for the plan. As I said previously, North Dakota's score will be raised to 8 out of 10.
- In the 2007 session, the legislature appropriated funding for the Department of Health to purchase antivirals for a potential influenza pandemic. We have waited to purchase the medication until preparations to store the antivirals are complete and we learn whether doses of antivirals for children will be available through the federal program. Because we hadn't actually placed the order when the report was developed, the state did not get credit for this effort. Earlier, we had indicated to the federal government that we most

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definitely will be ordering the antivirals. Once we have placed the order, we will have achieved 9 out of the 10 indicators in the report.

- Review of current state law indicates that it provides adequate liability protection for volunteers who help in our response efforts. However, North Dakota didn't get credit for this indicator because the law is different from the model legislation advocated by TFAH. If they were to acknowledge North Dakota's law, we would achieve a score of 10 out of 10.

Although the TFAH report is not a comprehensive evaluation of a state's preparedness, it does acknowledge that North Dakota has strengthened its ability to respond to public health emergencies. Public health preparedness and emergency response are an ongoing priority of the North Dakota Department of Health and our partners, and we are committed to continuing to improve our response to any emergency our state may face.

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